In these days of media saturation, it is difficult to picture what happened to John Troan 50-plus years ago. The young reporter for the Pittsburgh Press was assigned to “fill in around the ads” in the Press annual health supplement. He “filled in” such good stories, Troan recalls, that he was conscripted as the paper’s first medical writer. This was the early 1950s, when doctors in private practice were not allowed to talk to the media (it was considered unethical self promotion), though medical researchers could. At that time, Pitt’s medical school didn’t have much of a public-relations operation, Troan recalls. “Nothing,” agrees Patricia McCormack, medical writer for the old Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph.
Troan’s crosstown competition. Not that Pitt was so different from other schools in that regard. Stanford, for instance, didn’t institute a medical-school PR office until 1959. Until then, as at Pitt, press releases on such matters were covered by a small university PR office, written by whichever staff member caught (or didn’t avoid) the boss’ eye that day.

Troan’s career eventually had him covering science in Washington, D.C., for Scripps-Howard, then serving as editor of the Press before its demise. But first, he got the inside story of a lifetime at Pitt, as he recalls in his memoir, Passport to Adventure (Networks Press).

In his search for a good story, Troan regularly visited the office of Campbell Moses, M.D. ’41, director of Pitt’s Addison Gibson Laboratory. One day Moses suggested Troan look up “that young whiz the dean [William S. McClellan] brought in from Michigan to set up a virus-research lab.” Jonas Salk was working on an experimental flu vaccine and about to test it on 15,000 soldiers in New Jersey. Troan approached the researcher, who finally agreed to let him write about the test, but wanted to approve the article before publication (a proposal that would be handily dismissed today by most major dailies). Troan argued that Salk wouldn’t be able to read it in time for the Sunday edition. “I’ll make a deal with you,” he told Salk. “If I foul the story up, you never need to talk to me again.”

Sunday afternoon, he received a telegram: You did a splendid job. Jonas E. Salk. Thus began a relationship in which Troan helped to write the parental consent form for the first polio vaccine field trials, edited Salk’s statement when a batch of contaminated vaccine caused 200 cases of polio, and was generally the consummate insider—to the chagrin of his competition, who considered the relationship too cozy.

Polio was every parent’s dread; 57,000 cases—mostly children and young adults—hit the United States in 1952, resulting in 21,269 deaths. The nation was frantic for a vaccine.

In 1949, Harvard’s John Enders and colleagues found a way to cultivate the polio virus in a test tube—the key step that could lead to a vaccine. (They received the Nobel Prize in 1954.) Salk was diverted from his influenza research.

“Everybody was fooling around with the polio thing, and I thought I’d play around, too, and maybe get some experience,” he told Troan. Pitt was among the universities commissioned the tedious work of classifying the various polio viruses; it was found they could be sorted into three main strains. Salk then began to investigate a potential vaccine using viruses from the three strains. Salk’s associate Julius Youngner managed to exponentially increase the amount of virus they could grow and work with; his group then killed the virus with formaldehyde, while stimulating the production of antibodies against the disease. Researchers led by the University of Cincinnati’s Albert Sabin dismissed the idea and were exploring a live virus vaccine.

One evening in May 1952, Troan met Salk just before a School of Medicine fundraising dinner. Salk “casually” told Troan that he would soon begin tests of a vaccine on humans; it had already been successfully tested on monkeys, he said.

“It is the first indication that science is so close to its goal of wiping out the scourge of infantile paralysis by vaccination—the way smallpox has been eradicated,” Troan wrote for the next day’s Press, and wire services soon took the electrifying story around the world.

In the next months, Troan reported on the first human tests comparing antibody levels in children undergoing treatment for polio with polio-free children who had been vaccinated. He then covered a small study in which 161 Pittsburgh schoolchildren were given the vaccine and others a placebo. (Eventually that test included 7,000 Pittsburgh children.) Before the Pittsburgh test, Salk inoculated himself, his three children, and his wife. All tests showed the killed-virus vaccine to be effective, and safe. The stage was set for a massive field trial of the vaccine.

The trial began in April 1954 and included 1.8 million children in 12 states. In the double-blind study, 425,440 children received three injections of vaccine, another 203,206 received a placebo, and others were considered controls. Researchers monitored the children throughout the polio season; the final results were evaluated by a team at the University of Michigan led by respected epidemiologist Thomas Francis. The final evaluation was to be announced in Ann Arbor on April 12, 1955. But on April 3, Troan’s pipelines revealed enough for him to announce, via the Press: “The Salk vaccine will be released for general use—probably within 10 days.”

On April 12, he was in the huge throng that descended on Ann Arbor. “The formal verdict on the Salk vaccine was disclosed today amid fanfare and drama far more typical of a Hollywood premiere than a medical meeting,” wrote William Lecce for the New York Times. Indeed, the news release distributed by the University of Michigan News Service caught the drum-beating atmosphere—“The vaccine works. It is safe, effective and potent.”

Troan’s own story, dictated over telephone to the Press, ran under, as he puts it, the “most satisfying headline of my reportorial career: ‘Polio Is Conquered.’”

As news poured out of Salk’s laboratory, Pitt had established its own medical public-relations office, directed by the late Tom Coleman. Coleman, as Troan recalls, was on hand for the Ann Arbor “feast.” But neither he nor Salk nor anyone else was prepared for the clamor that followed. The scientist was in huge demand for interviews, TV and radio appearances, presentations, awards, even a White House visit. One college, unable to get Salk to accept an award personally, asked Troan to appear in his stead. (Troan demurred.) Coleman was assigned to deal with the onslaught. He fielded so many requests that he lost his voice.

In his memoir, Troan reports that with Salk’s encouragement, the medical news service attempted to rename the “Salk vaccine” the “Pitt vaccine,” but the idea never took, even with Troan. “As a personal favor, I did switch . . . but gave up when ‘Salk’ exhibited greater staying power.”

Still, by whatever name, the vaccine had put Pitt medical research, its media relations program—and Troan—into the big leagues.